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ABSTRACT

Family support programs are proactive efforts based on the assumptions that families have primary responsibility for their children's development and well-being; that healthy families are the foundation of a healthy society; that families operate as part of a total social system; and that the institutions upon which families rely for support must assist families' efforts to raise their children effectively. Typical program components include life skills training, parent information classes and support groups, parent-child groups and activities, informal drop-in times, information and referral services, crisis intervention, and auxiliary support services. In recent years, school initiatives to support families have focused on work with parents of preschool children to ensure school readiness; the involvement of parents in school programs and administration; and the integration of community health and social services into the school. School readiness includes children's physical health, self-confidence, and social competence, in addition to their academic knowledge and skills. Readiness is affected by children's innate abilities and shaped by people and environments. Readiness depends on the expectations and capacities of elementary schools as well as the quality of early childhood programs. Assuring children's readiness is both a community and parental responsibility. Brief descriptions of four school readiness programs (Early Childhood Family Education, Parent and Child Education, Parents as Teachers, and Providing a Sure Start) and five resource organizations are provided. (AC)

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Family Support Programs and School Readiness

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Overview of Family Support Programs

Family support programs began to appear in the early 1970s and are now proliferating across the country. Initially established as small, grassroots, community-based programs, they are currently growing in number, size, and complexity. The National Resource Center for Family Support Programs has developed a series of Fact Sheets that provide introductions to eight different types of family support programs, addressing the issues of child abuse, family literacy, school readiness, school-linked services, alcohol and other drug abuse prevention, comprehensive collaborative

PREMISES OF FAMILY SUPPORT

The influence of the family on a child cannot be overestimated. The family is a child's first source of information and the primary model for how a child experiences relationships. It helps a child begin to communicate and to learn personal and cultural values and beliefs. The family teaches a child ways to live in a complex world, and it provides a child with a sense of belongingness and a foundation for self-esteem. Families, and specifically parents, who are confident and effective in these responsibilities are more likely to raise healthy and productive children.

Dramatic changes have occurred in the structure and patterns of family life in the U.S. over the past 20 years. The population has become increasingly mobile, and parents often function without help from extended family. Divorce rates have risen. Many children are born to unmarried mothers or raised in a single-parent household. Others are "latchkey" children whose parents work outside the home. Family support programs have emerged in response to these changes. The settings in which they operate vary widely, as do the types of services and resources they offer to families. But all programs are geared toward a common goal: increasing the ability of families to successfully nurture their children.

Family support programs emphasize a proactive approach toward the prevention of problems. To this end, they provide supports which can enhance effective functioning within the family, and, they foster a sense of family self-sufficiency and empowerment. The structured incorporation of the family into all aspects of programs to enhance a child's development sets family support programs apart from other kinds of services for families.

All family support programs are based on the following assumptions:

- Families have primary responsibility for their children's development and well-being; they need resources and supports that will enable them to fulfill that responsibility effectively.
- Healthy families are the foundation of a healthy society. Families who are unable to promote their children's development ultimately place the entire society at risk.
- Families operate as part of a total system. Children cannot be viewed as separate from their families, nor can families be viewed separately from their communities, their cultural heritage or the society at large. Decisions made on behalf of children must consider the ways in which these various systems are interconnected.
- The systems and institutions upon which families rely for support must assist families' efforts to effectively raise their children. They must adjust and coordinate their services so as not to hinder families' abilities to maintain positive environments for their children.

TYPICAL PROGRAM COMPONENTS

Family support programs operate successfully in diverse communities and settings. Many are separate, free-standing, non-profit agencies; others are sponsored by churches, hospitals, schools, day-care centers, or colleges and universities. Specific program content and structure are determined by the needs of the families being served, and are designed to complement already existing community services and resources. Most family support programs include the following:

- Life skills training. This may include family literacy, education, employment or vocational training, or enhancement of personal development skills such as a problem solving, stress reduction, and communication.
- Parent information classes and support groups. These provide instruction in child development and opportunities for parents to share their experiences and concerns with peers.

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- Parent-child groups and family activities, which provide occasions for parents to spend more time with their children
- Drop-in time to provide parents with informal opportunities to spend time with staff members and other parents
- Information and referral services
- Crisis intervention/family counseling to respond to parents' special concerns about their children or specific family issues
- Auxiliary support services such as clothing exchanges, emergency food,

Introduction to Family Support School Initiatives

In recent years, a consensus has emerged that America's traditional approach to educating its children will not adequately prepare them for the demands of a global economy. Rising dropout rates and adult illiteracy are indicators that schools are losing the battle to keep students committed to their own education. Today, more than 96 percent of adults have not completed high school. More than 20 percent of African American and Hispanic youth leave school before 12th grade. In some rural areas, the drop-out rate is above 40 percent. Clearly, we cannot continue to rely solely on the efforts of primary and secondary teachers to educate children; we must take a broader, more holistic approach to education.

Proponents of this approach argue that since children spend 70 percent of their waking time outside of school, greater attention must be given to the growth and development that takes place in their homes and communities. Studies have estimated that primary grade students actually acquire most of their literacy skills and knowledge during activities in non-school settings. And, it has been documented that students who perform best on current measures of school achievement regularly participate in an array of challenging and entertaining activities that require them to practice reading, writing, oral communication, computation, decision-making and problem-solving skills. Studies show that children who have the greatest access to opportunities for literacy stimulation outside of school are the best prepared to meet the demands of our global society. Most importantly, supporters argue that the most recent education research clearly demonstrates that primary and secondary schools are much more effective at educating *all* children if they have strong partnerships with families and the community in which they serve.

Encouraged by the results of innovative parent-school-community collaborative projects and current research, several states, municipalities, and local communities have initiated very ambitious educational partnerships. The National Resource Center for Family Support Programs sees these partnerships developing into three broad categories: those that work with pre-school parents to ensure a child's school readiness, those that integrate parental involvement into school programs and administration, and those that integrate community health and social services into the school.

- **School Readiness**
  These programs provide parents with the information and support they need to raise mentally and physically healthy children who arrive at school prepared to learn. Often they are designed to provide services on a one-to-one basis. Other programs emphasize center-based early childhood programming.

- **Parent Involvement**
  Parent involvement programs are aimed at empowering parents to take a proactive role in the education of their children. While parent involvement programs like the PTA have existed for years, the new wave of initiatives seeks to involve parents more actively in the classroom as teacher's aides and in school management as advisors for curriculum review and school policy decisions.

- **School-linked Services**
  The goal of school-linked programs is to improve student's educational achievement by ensuring that the health and social needs of all students are met. In these programs, schools serve as the focal point for the delivery of community health and social services for families. Services provided to students and their families include primary and preventive health care, drug and alcohol abuse counseling, family crisis counseling, day care, teen parenting classes, employment counseling and training, and transportation. Services are provided at the school or at a site near the school.

Although each of these approaches is distinctly different, the common thread that runs through all three is their emphasis on respect for parents, sharing of power and territory, and the explicit goal of achieving school success for all children.

Defining School Readiness

Over the past two decades, there has been a growing consensus that early education programs with strong parent and community involvement produce better students. Studies have shown that positive parent-community-school partnerships improve a child's overall growth and development, and also compensate for a child's underdevelopment. After reviewing current research and interviewing parents and teachers, *The Report of the National Task Force on School Readiness*, sponsored by the National Association of State Boards of Education, concluded that parents, early education programs, and communities all have an essential role in a child's school readiness. As a result, the Task Force put forth a **redefinition** of school readiness. Their definition has four important elements:

- School readiness is far more than academic knowledge and skills. Readiness includes children's physical health, self-confidence, and social competence.
- School readiness is not determined solely by the innate abilities and capacities of young children. Readiness is shaped and developed by people and environments.
- School readiness is not solely determined by the quality of early childhood programs. Readiness also depends on the expectations and capacities of elementary schools.
- School readiness is not solely the responsibility of individual parents. Communities have a stake in the healthy development of young children — and an obligation to support families.

These four elements clearly move beyond the traditional "academic" approach to school readiness and incorporate a holistic consideration of children's mental, physical, and emotional development. The programs described below provide services that adopt this holistic approach to school readiness. Each program works in partnership with parents to build the family's capacity to respond appropriately to the developmental needs of its children. These programs acknowledge and address the contexts in which families exist, appreciating and valuing each family's community, culture, and individual traditions, values, and lifestyles.

SCHOOL READINESS PROGRAM MODELS

Studies have found that the form of parent and community involvement is not important, as long as activities are well planned, comprehensive, and long lasting. The programs below represent the wide variety of strategies used to encourage active participation on the part of families and communities in the preparation of children for school success.

MODEL 1: EARLY CHILDHOOD FAMILY EDUCATION

Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) is a program for all Minnesota families whose children are between birth and kindergarten enrollment. It recognizes that families provide the children's first and most important learning environments and that parents are children's first and most significant teachers. It is the mission of Early Childhood Family Education to strengthen families and support the ability of all parents to provide the best possible environment for the healthy growth and development of their children.

Planning for Minnesota's Early Childhood Family Education program started in 1971. After a ten year pilot stage of the project, legislation in 1984 provided for statewide implementation. ECFE was piloted by the State Department of Education through the Council on Quality Education. Between 1984 and 1991, the program expanded phenomenally from 34 pilot projects to 380 programs statewide.

Today, ECFE programs have been established in approximately 98 percent of Minnesota's 380 school districts.

The three main components of ECFE are parent education, parent-child interaction, and early childhood education. These components are provided in various formats as the most common type of direct service offered by ECFE programs.

Other components represented include:

- Special events such as lectures, one-day workshops, drop-in activities, gym nights, family events, field trips
- Home visits
- Parent-child-together series (for example, infant classes)
- Toy, book, and learning materials lending library
- Information and referral services

Approximately 185,000 children and parents, representing one-third of the eligible population of children, participated in ECFE in 380 school districts during 1990-91. It involves more young children and their families than any other publicly-sponsored early childhood program or service in Minnesota.

MODEL 2: PARENT AND CHILD EDUCATION

In 1986, the Kentucky Department of Education and the Kentucky General Assembly created Kentucky's Parent and Child Education Program (PACE) to address the problems of undereducation and poverty -- problems which affected a significant proportion of the state's population. The program seeks to solve the problems of intergenerational school failure by addressing family characteristics that contribute to a pattern of undereducation and unemployment. Recognizing the interdependency of the family and the school, two major socializing forces, PACE influences them simultaneously in one program in the public schools. PACE seeks to raise parents' educational levels, to improve children's learning skills, to increase parents' educational expectations for their children, and to develop positive relations between home and school. PACE is a family support program that focuses on family literacy.

In most districts, the centers are located in the public elementary school. A few are in nearby mobile units, others are in neighboring churches or buildings. Each PACE unit has one classroom for adults and one for children, usually close to each other. Parents and children attend three full school days each week. Staff is hired for four days. The staff uses the fourth day for preparation, home visits, and recruitment.

Programs provide the following services:

- Family, vocational, and life skills training
- Breakfast and lunch
- Parents adult education classes
- Early childhood classes
- Adult education
- Parents as Teachers classes
- Parents' Time, using curriculum developed by the Family Resource Coalition
- Breakfast and lunch
- Transportation

The participating population tends to be white, female, and between 20 and 35 years of age. Fewer than half the participants receive Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and fewer than half are from single-parent homes. The participating rural districts have few minorities in the population. All but three participating districts are rural. All are characterized by higher than average unemployment. Eleven of the 30 districts participating are in the Fifth Congressional district, acknowledged to be the poorest in the United States. The three urban districts are in the greater Cincinnati area of Northern Kentucky.

MODEL 3: PARENTS AS TEACHERS

The Parents As Teachers program (PAT) is a comprehensive parent education program for all Missouri families with children birth to four years of age. PAT is a home-school partnership in which home visits are made by trained parent educators to provide families vital information about child development and family functioning. This program provides services in all 543 school district in the state.

Parents As Teachers was first developed by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, with support from the Danforth Foundation. The project is administered entirely through the Missouri public school system. In addition to providing funds for local projects, the Missouri Department of Education established the Parents As Teachers National Center to provide technical assistance for Missouri school personnel and professionals across the country.

Parent educators provide the following services:

- Child development information
- Family development counseling
- Peer support groups
- Health monitoring and screening
- Referral for specialized services

During the 1990-91 school year, more than 57,000 families, or about 40 percent of those eligible, participated in the program. In an independent evaluation of the program, children from all socioeconomic groups were found to have benefited from the program.

MODEL 4: PROVIDING A SURE START

Providing a Sure Start (PASS) is one of the many programs under the umbrella of Lessie Bates Davis Neighborhood House. PASS is a prevention program that provides coordinated services to families to assist parents in preparing children for school success. The program focuses on environmentally at-risk infants and toddlers from birth to three years

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of age for whom conditions in the physical or social milieu (or both) have a high probability of interfering with the child's normal development.

PASS is located in East St. Louis, the most economically depressed city in the state of Illinois. Per capita income is less than $7,888 per year. Over 70 percent of parents and children are receiving public assistance. Forty percent of parents are functionally or marginally illiterate. The teen birth rate is 360 percent higher than the state average. These are only a few of the problems which have direct impact on families in the community.

PASS's objectives are (1) to increase parental knowledge of existing services; (2) to increase utilization of services; (3) to provide early identification of developmental delays and special needs; (4) to improve parenting skills; (5) to encourage early childhood development; (6) to improve overall environmental conditions; and (7) to reduce known barriers for parents success.

The program provides:

- Case management services
- Family and individual counseling
- Parenting groups
- Parent education and child development classes
- Parent child interaction groups
- Life skills classes including GED
- Childcare
- Drop-in center
- Transportation
- Toy and book lending library
- Recreational and cultural events

Participants are low-income families: 97 percent African American, 3 percent white. Participants may be self-referred or referred by any community agency. PASS is a voluntary program. A family is requested to commit to the program until the child reaches three years of age. When a family's youngest child turns three, that child moves into a preschool program in the local school district.

Resource Organizations

The National Resource Center for Family Support Programs (NRC/FSP)

Family Resource Coalition
200 S. Michigan Avenue, Suite 1520
Chicago, IL 60604
312/341-0900 FAX 312/341-9361

The National Resource Center for Family Support Programs (NRC/FSP) was established to assure the availability of current knowledge in the field of family support on the design, development, and implementation of family support programs.

The NRC/FSP operates a computerized database to document and disseminate information on exemplary and innovative family support programs across the country.

The Center identifies and develops resource materials for policymakers and practitioners (such as program descriptions, bibliographies, program development manuals, training curricula and monographs), and provides technical assistance, training, and consulting in family support program design and operations.

National Committee for Citizens in Education (NCCE)

10840 Little Neighborhood Pkwy, Suite 301
Columbia, MD 21044
301/977-9300

A 19-year old nonprofit organization, NCCE is a national advocate for parent involvement and for promoting local action to improve the quality of public education. NCCE is involved in collaborative dropout prevention projects. Other services include a toll-free hotline (1-800-NETWORK) providing advice to parents with school-related problems or questions; training for parents, teachers, and administrators in school improvement techniques; a computerized database providing information on issues such as parent/student rights, discipline policies, and opportunities for special needs children and adults; and the publication of books and a newspaper for parents, *Network*, focusing on public involvement and school improvement.

National Association of Partners in Education (NAPE)

601 Wythe St., Suite 200
Alexandria, VA 22314
703/836-4880

The National Association of Partners in Education, Inc. (NAPE) is devoted to providing leadership in the formation and growth of effective partnerships to encourage success for all students. Through its member programs—involving corporate, education, government, and civic leaders—NAPE represents the more than 2.6 million volunteers involved in the nation's 200,000 partnership initiatives in local school districts. NAPE services include: networking; a computerized database; state, regional, and national conferences; specialized training for program development; national awards programs; a monthly newsletter and other publications; government relations; public awareness campaigns; and national survey and research projects.

Institute for Responsive Education (IRE)

605 Commonwealth Ave
Boston, MA 02215
617/353-3309

IRE is a nonprofit public interest research and advocacy organization created in 1973 to study, promote, and assist citizen participation in educational decision-making and school improvement. Their work is in the areas of policy development, technical assistance, research, and advocacy projects, and they have published case-study examples, research summaries, and resource and how-to guides on education issues and school policymaking. Among their publications is *Equity and Choice*, a magazine published three times a year for administrators, teachers, parents, and policymakers, which describes innovative and model programs. Publications brochure available.

National Community Education Association (NCEA)

119 N. Payne Street
Alexandria, VA 22314
703/683-NCEA

NCEA began in 1966 with the goal of advancing and supporting community involvement in K-12 education, community self-help, and opportunities for lifelong learning. It provides members with national leadership and advocacy, publications, conferences, workshops, and information and referral services. NCEA addresses community problems and concerns through community advisory councils and partnerships of individual citizens, educators, public and private organizations. NCEA publishes the quarterly *Community Education Journal* and *Community Education Today*, a newspaper printed ten times a year.

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